

# Introduction

– the purpose of this book



The first Mercedes-Benz model to be officially called the S-Class (for Sonderklasse or 'Special' Class), the W116 Series set new standards in performance, comfort and safety when it was launched in 1972. Designed by Friedrich Geiger, the new body had a formal, imposing appearance, with Mercedes' trademark vertical headlamps of the 1960s replaced by horizontal units. Like every S-Class since, it was a symbol of success. Remarkably for such an expensive luxury model, the 450 SEL was named European Car of the Year in 1973.

The W116 offered a choice of smooth six- and eight-cylinder petrol engines, culminating in the hugely powerful 450 SEL 6.9, as well as a more economical turbodiesel for the North American market. Only available from the factory as a saloon (sedan) – in standard and long-wheelbase versions – nearly half a million cars were built at Sindelfingen during its eight-year career.

Mercedes was one of the few manufacturers at the time to have its own wind tunnel, and the W116 was much more efficient aerodynamically than its predecessors. It was technically advanced, too, with a new design of semi-trailing arm rear suspension and anti-dive and anti-squat geometry. Over time, many of the features introduced on the S-Class would work their way down Mercedes' range.

The 450 SEL 6.9 was an exceptional car: engineered to the highest standards, and, fitted with a sophisticated hydropneumatic suspension, it was a more civilised successor to the 300 SEL 6.3. Used by many F1 drivers in the day –



**A green W116 flanked by its predecessors and the W126, which succeeded it.  
(Courtesy Mercedes-Benz Classic)**

# 1 Is it the right car for you?

– marriage guidance



## Tall and short drivers

All drivers should find plenty of room to get comfortable behind the wheel.

## Weight of controls

The major controls are very manageable, as all W116 S-Class models were fitted with power steering and servo-assisted disc brakes all round, and the majority of cars were equipped with automatic transmission.

## Will it fit in the garage?

| Model                                    | Length         | Width                       | Height                      |
|--|----------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Standard-wheelbase<br>(European bumpers) | 195.3in/4960mm | 73.4-73.6in/<br>1865-1870mm | 56.1-56.3in/<br>1425-1430mm |
| Long-wheelbase<br>(European bumpers)     | 199.2in/5060mm | 73.4-73.6in/<br>1865-1870mm | 56.1-56.3in/<br>1425-1430mm |
| 300 SD (US-spec<br>safety bumpers)       | 205.5in/5220mm | 73.6in/1870mm               | 56.1in/1425mm               |

## Interior space

The W116 was a large car for its time, and there is generous space for four or



**Luxurious rear seats in a long-wheelbase 450 SEL.  
(Courtesy Artcurial Motorcars/Dirk de Jager)**

## 3 Living with a W116

– will you get along together?



### Good points

One of the dealers specialising in the model described the W116 to the author as marking a “quantum leap” forward when compared to the W108/W109 models it replaced. In every respect, it was a far more sophisticated design, making it feel much more modern to drive. Its mechanical refinement and smoothness bring it closer to the W126 of the 1980s. It was planned from the outset to be fitted with V8 engines and these now had a ‘proper’ automatic gearbox using a torque converter rather than the fluid coupling of its predecessors. The suspension design was also highly advanced, ensuring much improved handling and an excellent ride. More sophisticated still, the 450 SEL 6.9 was in a class of its own when launched, and was, arguably, the best car in the world.

Although they may seem unyielding at first, the characteristically firm German seats provide great support on a long journey. Levels of equipment vary widely from car to car, but a well-optioned 450 SEL, for example, will have many of the features we now take for granted, such as air-conditioning, power-operated windows and a sunroof. All cars were extremely well finished, and the wool-rich velour or leather upholstery optioned on many cars give a genuine feeling of luxury.

Occupant safety was a major concern at the time the W116 was in development, and the model served as the basis for a series of experimental safety vehicles. It was one of the first production cars to offer ABS anti-lock braking as an



Space and luxury in this 450 SEL. (Courtesy Robin Adams ©2015 RM Sotheby's)

# 8 Key points

– where to look for problems



## Exterior

- Are all the panels straight, with even gaps?
- Are there signs of corrosion, particularly on the wings, doors and sills and around the sunroof (if fitted)?
- Is the chrome trim complete and in good condition?
- Are the seals for the doors and windows in good order?



The rear wing, wheelarch and sill are all potential rust spots.

Are the big chrome bumpers and radiator cowling still in good condition?  
(Courtesy GGE Classic)



windows, a radio and rev counter were all extras, so you shouldn't take it for granted that they will be fitted to all the cars you view.

Cars sold in North America were generally better equipped, as were the 450 SEL and 6.9 models sold in Europe, with velour or leather upholstery and all-round power-operated windows; many of these models also came with cruise control and air-conditioning or climate control.

Further desirable options include an electric sliding roof and alloy wheels. An original stereo, such as a high-end Becker Mexico, is now highly valued. Other options – typically found on top-end 450 SEL and 6.9 models – included a limousine-style division between the front and rear seats, an early in-car telephone system, and even a fridge in the luggage compartment, but these are rarely seen on cars for sale now.

### Undesirable features

Cars with manual transmission are generally less sought-after than automatics. Most enthusiasts today put a premium on originality, so body kits (even from reputable firms such as AMG, Brabus or Lorinser), non-standard alloy or chrome wheels and chrome wheelarch extensions (which harbour rust, in any case) will put off many would-be buyers. So too will non-standard steering wheels and modern stereos inside the car.

Colours are always a personal matter, but dark colours such as black, grey and dark blue seem to suit the car's lines and offset its abundant chrome trim; they have probably aged better than the bold solid colours that Mercedes also offered in the 1970s, although these also have their fans.



**Not all buyers will take to this car's AMG bodykit and alloy wheels.**  
(Courtesy Tom Wood ©2018 RM Sotheby's)